

Rosh Hashanah 5766
Power/Control
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In college I competed in the 141 lb. weight category of judo. It is a sport I picked up when I started college and immediately I found I had a knack for it. I guess because Judo is a grappling sport like wrestling, years of playing with my brothers paid off. And as in many of the martial arts, there are life lessons that are taught and learned in the motions. For judo, which means “the art of giving way,” all is summed up in the name. The art of giving way. Judo is all about directing a person’s energy to carry them in a direction they want to go by simply stepping aside and by getting out of the way. This is a wonderful way to approach the varied conflicts we find ourselves in as life unfolds.

That is the essence of judo. The art is learning how to direct while stepping out of the way. Judo works when the martial artist recognizes it is not through strength that one conquers but through direction and stewardship, through pointing the way and permitting the other to step through. *Lo b’koah, v’lo b’hayil ki im b’ruhi*. We do not overcome by power or by strength but through the spirit of God. Through ideals and freedom we find success and better than success – we find peace.

This summer forty-five of us traveled to Israel to behold the glory and holiness of our homeland and in the process we witnessed another dramatic stage in the evolution of our people in our land. *Am hofshi, b’artzeinu* – a free people in our own land, a place in which we are free, though pressured by world opinion but a place nonetheless where we have the freedom of self-determination. There we watched as our brothers and sisters exercised their freedom to willingly direct their own destiny and the use of their land. This summer they did so just as they were free in 1982 when Sadat and Begin made a deal where we gave back the Sinai in exchange for peace, a peace that has endured. So we watched another withdrawal. In exchange for peace with the Palestinians, Israel willingly and in a clear majority, decided to *unilaterally* give Gaza and portions of the region of Yehuda and Shomron, Judea and Samaria. Giving way in order to direct the path. It is the art of giving way, the methods and the policies, the sincerity and the commitment that will determine the success or the failure of this attempt. However, the Arab

world must come to realize this is an act of self determination, **not** a response to terror and violence, and only a people in a position of true power can take such an action.

However, the greater struggle this summer was not between Israel and its neighbors – as aggressive as they are – but within Israel itself. This great show of strength came not in giving over land but in showing compassion to those who were uprooted. Though the media portrayed a clash of settlers and soldiers. Though the images we have ingrained in our minds of those difficult exchanges are terrible, the vast majority of civilians and soldiers behaved in a manner that was exemplary. All extremists aside, the withdrawal was done not by one group carrying another away in paddy wagons but by soldiers and non-soldiers joining arms and walking away – albeit tearfully – walking away.

As the police and the army came to the towns of Gaza and the Shomron, the Rabbinic leadership explained to their followers it was time to go, but first asked the authorities to share in prayer. Together the soldiers and the settlers trying to find consolation joined arm in arm, gathered in a circle and in common anguish they recited the ancient words of Psalms. To which, from my hotel room looking out at the walls of the ancient city, a city so used to struggle, I offered the simple brakhah: *Barukh attah Adonai ozer yisrael b'gvurah*. May God continue to support us with strength, the strength to stand with our brothers and sisters as they carry out the difficult decisions that we hope will bring peace, while we have the courage never to demonize those who choose another path.

Let there be no mistake about it, our people in Israel are in a position of power. Tzahal, the IDF, Israel's Defense Force, is one of the greatest fighting forces ever trained and stands at the ready. They are in a position of strength and it is from that authority that our brothers and sisters in the holy land teach our great nation of America about use of power and vice versa. Our brothers and sisters in Israel learn so much from America. Israel and the United States stand together not just because of strategic military necessity but because of ideology. We are connected not just out of convenience but because of shared values of pluralism, covenant and a profound commitment to the value of human dignity. We share history and we now share suffering. We have shared action and we now have shared responsibility. Though democracy grows throughout the world, and

although more governments throughout the world are coming to recognize the inalienable right of people to determine their own destiny, there are still pockets of oppression that exist. Our country is still embroiled in a conflict with Iraq and there have been mistakes. When the Twin towers were attacked and destroyed we sought to ferret out the terrorists wherever they are.

Israel has taught us much about exercising control and the perils of power. Israel has taught us about the loss of innocence that comes when people overstep their bounds in executing their duties. When extreme/fanatic Jewish settlers seek to blow up an Arab school in the West Bank, we readily identify because we have soldiers who act unlawfully at Abu Graib and we understand that hateful rhetoric is often turned to inappropriate and sometimes fatal behavior. Therefore, we must be careful. It is already hard enough to make a case to the world that our presence on foreign soil is **not** driven by an emerging colonialism. When our soldiers misstep and bring disgrace to us, the battle becomes more fierce and our moral judgment is called, and rightfully so, into question. Our moral high ground is relinquished.

However, we must not let the pendulum swing completely in the opposite direction in order to compensate for mistakes. We must remain clear and committed to the morals and ethics that have made our nation great. We must not lose sight of the greater goal – bringing all people to a place of self-respect. We must never blindly and without thought relinquish control. People in places of strength must remember to remain thoughtful about how we behave because power and control brings responsibility and duty. Just because a few soldiers act illegitimately doesn't mean we should open the gates and let terrorists and enemy combatants walk free.

Gil Troy made the following statement in an incredibly insightful piece in the Jerusalem Report. "The dominant academic strain of post modernist, progressive politics worships Third World victimhood, condemning Westerners as oppressive. All too often, hypercritical politicking eclipses critical thought; sloganeering obscures analysis. Rhetorical inflation, sloppy thinking and anti-Western hysteria laced with double standards encourage absurd analogies, in which Guantanamo is labeled an American 'gulag'." We must be careful not to let the pendulum swing fully in the other direction. In the face of radical violence we must be careful that our response is measured, appropriate and in concert with our principles and standards.

Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg gives great language and elucidation to this issue in his insightful essay entitled “The Ethics of Power.” “No democracy is exempt from the perils of violent rage in a time of heightened tension.”

We created legislation that better assists the government in finding those who seek our destruction and live within our own borders. We must remain ever vigilant in the protection of human rights, be they on our own soil or abroad; whether in places under our control or places where we have sought to alleviate tyrannical rule.

Bahya Ibn Pakuda in his great work *Hovot Ha’livavot* distinguishes between the forbearance that humility poses on oneself as the victim of injustice and the obligation to redress the victimization of others. (*The Book of Directions of the Duties of the Heart*, 1973, chapter 6 F:9, 318, cited in Alan Udoff, “Tolerance,” in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, ed. Cohen and Mendes-Flohr). We must always be vigilant in maintaining a balance. Ibn Pakuda says, remember what it means to have been oppressed, remember the cruelty and the inhumanity, remember the pain and suffering caused, and use that as an inspiration to help others.

Lloyd Acton, the British historian, said it best when he remarked, “Power tends to corrupt, absolute power corrupts absolutely,” an observation that a person’s sense of morality lessens as his or her power increases. We must never lose our sense of obligation to God and to each other. That obligation must remain manifest in our behavior and we must keep an open mind to evaluate our own standards and practices, never permitting our thinking to become jaded by the repeated conduct of tyrants and terrorists. Friedrich Nietzsche explained, “generally we strive to acquire one emotional stance, one viewpoint for all of life’s situations and events: we usually call that ‘being of a philosophical mind.’ Rather than making oneself uniform, we may find greater value for the enrichment of knowledge by listening to the small voice of different life situations; each brings its own views with it. Thus we acknowledge and share the life and nature of many by not treating ourselves as rigid, invariable, single individuals.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too-Human*, 1984, pp. 256-57).

We should not permit our government to do it through partisan politics and we must not allow it in our own personal lives. We have to remain vigilant in weighing the choices we make during the significant crossroads of our lives. We cannot allow conflicts with our families and friends to carry on simply because of stubbornness or narrow vision. We must stretch ourselves, ever determined to see the other's perspective. Then we must find a way of letting go. The art of letting go, giving way must also be applied to our individual struggles. We must, in this season of the year, reflect on what ought to be our exit strategy for inner struggles and conflicts. How do we give way and move on from the guilt and misgivings for the choices and behaviors we have made. The struggle is no greater for a nation than it is for the person.

In a world that is polarizing, in which extremes taunt us with absolute certainty – and a false sense of security offered by their absolutism – we must remain thoughtful. This can be so difficult. Friends, it is hard to remain thoughtful in a world ever disposed to quick answers and charismatic persuasion. But we must remain diligent in our thoughtfulness and this takes strength and equaled conviction.

Ezehu gibor, mi-sheh kovetz et yitzro. Who is truly powerful? The one who conquers his evil impulse. (Pirkei Avot 4:1) We must examine our motivations and we must remain committed to a greater capacity for respect for human dignity because nations bring together individuals equal in their dignity. And if we are going to move ahead as a nation, then we must remain dedicated to the rights and privileges of every person here and abroad. *Midah k'neged midah* –every action has an equal and opposite reaction. When we treat others with dignity and respect then we will be treated the same way. When others perceive an abuse of power, they will seek to undermine that authority. *Mitzvah goreret mitzvah* when we bring kindness to the world, others will readily assume a partnership with us. In this do I believe – even if to date I have been proven wrong.

The lessons taught us this year are manifold. The difficulties and the challenges of nation building and war are sometimes, seemingly, insurmountable. The difficulties of conflict and the complexities of cultural differences create an environment of suspicion and doubt. Democracy in its application is sometimes flawed. But in the face of worldwide, ongoing versions of ethnic cleansing and inhumanity we recognize our unique position and place in history and we must act.

I don't think there is anyone who would disagree that war must always remain a last resort, but sometimes it is a harsh necessity with devastating human costs. And so we pray for peace. So I ask you to bow your head as I offer this prayer written by Ben Saul:

O Lord, who our ancestors called "Maker of peace in the heavens,"

be with us and bless us in our quest for peace.

Help us, O Source of peace, to find true peace –

in our lives and with our neighbors;

but keep us from a "peace" of complacency,

or a quiet of false security.

Help us, O Source of peace, to labor for peace-

in our community and in our nation; but keep us loyal to our convictions as we seek to reach out to others.

Help us, O Source of Peace, to strengthen the hands

Of those who work for peace in our troubled world;

But to strengthen too our devotion to freedom

And our dedication to justice for all.

Help us to welcome truth from whatever source,

And to sustain hopeful spirits at all times.

Keep us from being prisoners of precedent

Or hostage of habits – in thought or deed.

As You have taught us, the house of Israel,

to "love peace and pursue it,"

grant us, we pray the blessing of peace.

Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu v'al kol yisrael, v'imru amen.

May we find resolution to our struggles and find peace in a world at peace. *Shanah Tovah.*